

Everything You always Wanted to Know about Plagiarism*

*but were afraid to ask¹

What is plagiarism?

Presenting somebody else's work or ideas as your own is called plagiarism. This is applicable to all material – published or unpublished, printed or electronic, whether in the form of a manuscript or a printed edition. Plagiarism can be premeditated or unintentional. In academic writing, it usually takes the form of using somebody else's information/arguments/language in one's writing, without properly acknowledging one's intellectual debt to the original author.

Why is plagiarism wrong?

Plagiarism breaches one of the fundamental principles of the academic community – giving people credit for the information they have mined, the arguments they have made, and the language they have used. It signifies dishonesty in your professional field and hence is wrong both ethically and legally.

Ways of avoiding plagiarism while:

i. quoting verbatim from others' works :

All quoted phrases, sentences, and/or paragraphs must either be put inside quotation marks or be indented. They must always be accompanied by proper citation, clearly stating the exact source from which they have been quoted.

ii. paraphrasing others' works:

When you use in your own work arguments made by other people, you need to reference them properly as well. Simply changing the language of the original text is not enough. This is because plagiarism not only applies to language, but also extends to ideas, information, and arguments. Hence whenever you paraphrase others' works or use somebody else's arguments in your own, it is necessary to clearly acknowledge your intellectual debt to these people. The best thing to do while drawing upon others' works is to read them carefully, summarise their broad arguments and propositions in your own words, and indicate your sources clearly.

¹ The title is inspired by the name of the Woody Allen movie *Everything You always Wanted to Know about Sex*but Were Afraid to Ask* (1972).

iii. taking information from the internet:

Like all other types of information, anything taken from the internet always needs to be clearly referenced as well. At the same time, you also have to remember that a lot of the material available on the internet is not reliable. Hence, if you need to draw upon information from the internet, always try to do so from academic books and articles, which have gone through a process of scholarly scrutiny called 'peer review'. The latter is a method whereby anonymous scholars of every field scrutinise new scholarly output seeking publication. Publication of this output is conditional on the positive review of these reviewers. Through the process of peer review, the academic community seeks to control the quality of research and published academic output. Wikipedia – one of the most widely viewed information repositories of the internet – is, for example, not a scholarly source. This is because although community-edited, the material contained in it has not gone through the rigorous process of peer review. Hence while Wikipedia could be used as a quick provider of basic information at times, it cannot serve as a dependable and citable source for your academic work.

iv. presenting collaborative work:

In many cases, you will require to work in collaboration with others, including research assistants, language teachers, laboratory technicians, and fellow researchers. You must realise that your academic output owes to the contribution of these people as well. As such, it is necessary to acknowledge intellectual debt to them wherever applicable.

v. using your own work:

Any work that you have already submitted as a part one course or for one examination should not be re-submitted for another. In case your work has been published, you may draw upon it using the same principles of citation and referencing that is applicable for others' works.

What is the penalty of plagiarism?

Plagiarism is universally condemned in the academic community, of which you become a part through your enrollment in the university. Depending on the scale of plagiarism as well as the extent of commercial benefit expected to be drawn from a (published) work, the penalty of plagiarism can vary widely. Different universities have different policies for penalising incidents of plagiarism. This may range from mild penalty in the evaluation of your assignments/ answer scripts to more serious actions like disqualification from examinations. Authors of majorly plagiarised works, especially those which have been published for business, are also punishable by law.

Why else should you avoid plagiarism?

As a part of your education at your university, you will need to think and write independently. Plagiarism seriously undermines this very purpose of your education. Reading and comprehending others' works, paraphrasing their main arguments in a nuanced way, and incorporating these paraphrases and/or quotations in your own writing with proper citations are all integral parts of your academic training. If you plagiarise, you contradict your own academic interests and endanger your own learning process. Like all professions, academics also comes with its own work ethic. All students are expected to imbibe this ethic as a part of their education. Indulgence in plagiarism and thereby being disrespectful towards the intellectual contribution of fellows academics can endanger not only your own career very seriously, but also undermines this fundamental ethic and the environment of mutual trust that binds the community together.

Does this mean you should not draw upon others' works?

On the contrary, drawing upon others' work is imperative for your own. Academic work is necessarily collaborative. The knowledge pool of every discipline is created as a result of the cumulative research of generations of scholars. In doing your own work, you are supposed to harness this knowledge pool and contribute to it. But in the process, you need to give credit to the people who have contributed to this pool before you and on whose work your contribution rests. This is done through the practice of citation.

What is citation?

In academic writing, citation is the act of inserting in the main text of a piece of writing the source of a piece of information/ argument/ language, which has been borrowed from somebody else's work. Depending on various disciplinary and publishing conventions, this is usually done in the form of footnotes, endnotes, or in-text references. In many cases, it is also necessary to compile the names of the works cited in the form of a separate bibliography. Apart from giving you a means of acknowledging your intellectual debt to your fellow scholars, the practice of citation also gives others the opportunity to verify your references and information, and thereby scrutinise the veracity of your arguments.

How to avoid committing plagiarism unintentionally?

Plagiarism does not always flow from a deliberate intention to cheat. It is often a product of ignorance about citation practices and referencing conventions. It could also result from failing to remember to take down notes and references while reading others' works. However, even in such cases, the charge of plagiarism, if brought, is difficult to dodge. Hence, in order to steer clear of any such possibility, you should pay great attention to picking up the citation practices of your discipline(s) as early as possible and learn from your teachers how to take notes while reading a text and eventually generate citations from them.